In the face of economic languor, rampant emigration, political instability, unchecked poverty, growing unemployment, recurring epidemics, social turmoil, and high illiteracy and infant mortality rates, Italy’s ventures (or rather mis-ventures) into colonialism have baffled scholars. However, in the scope of modern European and British colonial history and the mountain of scholarship that it has generated, these calamitous, unprofitable exploits have received paltry attention. Even less consideration has been given to the Italian colonizers’ physical impact on the environment and its measurement against Italian citizenship in earlier years. This was largely measured against attitudes toward conquered peoples. These were largely measured against European norms of modernity. Conquered Greeks, for example, were not considered culturally distinct from the Italians, but simply not as modern. Coastal Libyan Arabs were placed lower in the civilization scale but had modernization potential, even being offered Italian citizenship in earlier years. This was due largely to Libyans’ use of permanent structures, credited by Italians to Libya’s extended exposure to Roman architectural heritage. East Africans were perceived as ahistorical and most distant from Italians due to their blackness and their use of impermanent structures.

Fuller complements her discussion of architects’ writings and buildings with careful scrutiny of the shifts in political discourse that shaped building policies as well as public attitudes. These discourses variously supported or resisted the continued bellicose campaign for the acquisition of colonial lands. Quotations of parliamentary discussions matched with citations from popular poetry illustrate with clarity how the manipulative rhetoric of politicians powerfully shaped an imaginary geography in the eyes of the public.

Increasing the complexity of colonial spatial politics was the diversity of Italian attitudes toward conquered peoples. These were largely measured against European norms of modernity. Conquered Greeks, for example, were not considered culturally distinct from the Italians, but simply not as modern. Coastal Libyan Arabs were placed lower on the civilization scale but had modernization potential, even being offered Italian citizenship in earlier years. This was due largely to Libyans’ use of permanent structures, credited by Italians to Libya’s extended exposure to Roman architectural heritage. East Africans were perceived as ahistorical and most distant from Italians due to their blackness and their use of impermanent structures.

Fuller complements her discussion of architects’ writings and buildings with careful scrutiny of the shifts in political discourse that shaped building policies as well as public attitudes. These discourses variously supported or resisted the continued bellicose campaign for the acquisition of colonial lands. Quotations of parliamentary discussions matched with citations from popular poetry illustrate with clarity how the manipulative rhetoric of politicians powerfully shaped an imaginary geography in the eyes of the public.

Increasing the complexity of colonial spatial politics was the diversity of Italian attitudes toward conquered peoples. These were largely measured against European norms of modernity. Conquered Greeks, for example, were not considered culturally distinct from the Italians, but simply not as modern. Coastal Libyan Arabs were placed lower on the civilization scale but had modernization potential, even being offered Italian citizenship in earlier years. This was due largely to Libyans’ use of permanent structures, credited by Italians to Libya’s extended exposure to Roman architectural heritage. East Africans were perceived as ahistorical and most distant from Italians due to their blackness and their use of impermanent structures.

The significance of the indigenous built environment and its measurement against standards of modernity are clues to the Italian logic of colonization. More than social controls, political leadership, and economic
development, buildings were seen to have agency over people and define them as a society. This perception provided justification for Italian colonial expansion in Africa (finding a lack of "architecture" there), and it informed Italians’ preoccupation with developing the colonial built environment over other duties, such as managing the colonies and exploiting resources. Their tactic was to control the natives through urbanism, a technique that the government was concomitantly applying in cities and villages in Italy to control the urban and rural poor. This policy developed from overlapping beliefs: that good design could resolve social problems (i.e., that physical hygiene regulates public hygiene and moral hygiene), and that architecture stands for a nation.  

A particularly intriguing aspect of these colonial policies was Italian tolerance for and support of Islamic worship (building many fine mosques) and intolerance of and harm to Christian worship (damaging monasteries and massacring clergy). Fuller suggests that the Christian conquerors feared Islam and wished to pacify its practitioners, yet they feared even more the social control that Orthodox and Coptic Christian leaders exerted over colonized practitioners and therefore crippled the churches. Within Italy, Mussolini collaborated with the Roman Catholic Church—despite personal aversion to it—to gain the support of its followers, but outside of Italy he did not need Christian support. Fuller’s argument, however, does not fully explain this differential treatment, for in the understanding of this reviewer, Islam can exert equal or greater social controls on its followers. Additional analysis of questions of race might provide an explanation of Italian behavior during this racially tense time. By emphasizing and supporting Islam in the native population, the Italians underlined the differences between natives and themselves. Christian commonality, however, would have eroded the distinction between colonized and colonizer. Seeing black Abyssins as Christians would have placed them on more equal footing with their Italian dominators—a concept probably repugnant to many colonialists.

Fuller significantly points out that colonized populations were marginalized—even elided—within much Italian colonial discourse. To explain this she argues that the basis for the Italian colonial enterprise was neither economic expansion nor spreading civilization through modern architecture (despite political rhetoric to that effect). While the focus of these ill-planned and seemingly reckless exploits was Italy’s image in the world, their real subject and object was the Italian citizen. In colonizing and civilizing distant lands, Italian colonists were meant to be civilizing and modernizing themselves.

Underlining this point is the fact that contemporaneous with foreign “external colonization,” Italy was conducting “internal colonization,” in which landless peasants along with the poor, siphoned from crowded cities, were assigned (like the colonists) to planned, modern, government-sponsored villages (“New Towns”), given reclaimed land, and yoked with the task of farming. The integrated idea, called bonifica, was to solve overpopulation in cities and the hygienic and social problems that it spawned, curb emigration, increase economic self-sufficiency (individually and nationally), and disperse and control this hostile, revolutionary element of the population. The colonial borghi extended this re-ruralization and resettlement plan into foreign territories. In the overseas context, politicians defined Italy as a proletarian colonizer not interested in exploiting native labor like other colonial powers (an untruth) but in putting land to productive use in the hands of Italian peasants.

In solving these social and economic problems, Italy hoped to raise itself to the level of its modern peers and competitors, France and the United Kingdom. This accomplishment would not only garner prestige for Italy, but would also secure its political independence from prevailing powers. Summarized in the term Italetta (a diminutive, feminized Italy), Italy’s perceived position of inferiority and weakness stemmed in part from the recentness of its coalescence into a nation and its history of being ruled by superior powers. In owning colonies itself, Italy hoped to solidify its own national legitimacy, national unity, and (dominant, masculine, modern) national identity. Seeking to outdo more established European powers, Italian colonialists invoked the puissant empire of their Roman ancestors. Designating the Mediterranean as “the repository of the Italian spirit, past and future” (89), they perceptually placed Italy on equal footing with peer nations while distinguishing it and giving it autonomy and self-respect. This was the real objective of Italy’s colonial enterprise.

An important subordinate theme of Italy’s nation-building effort and its grappling with the challenge to be modern was the rhetorical creation of southern Italy as Other. In this Orientalizing project, the South was cast as a hindrance to Italy’s ascent as a modern European power. While northern European nations conceptualized Africa as all territory south of France, post-unified Italy placed the division line between northern and southern Italy. By acquiring colonies in Africa, this imaginary border moved south to the African continent, thereby geographically and socially elevating southern Italy. Eventually, with the annexation of Tripoli to Italy, the line shifted yet farther south. Fuller defines this as the Italian concept of “demographic colonization”; the placement of Libyan labor on the lowest rung of the social ladder raised the lowest class of Italians (day-laborers, often from the South) up a notch.

Unlike those volumes of post-colonial history that take colonizers to task for moral and physical human injustices, this book reveals Italian colonialism as kinder and gentler, although this was the result of general disorganization, misplaced goals, and an emphasis on colonial imaginings over actual colonial rule, and not intentional morality and humaneness. While the author makes occasional references to shocking and brutal atrocities committed against native inhabitants by Italian colonizers (one leader, for example, was nicknamed “the butcher of Libya”), she reveals a gap between stated and implemented policies. This allowed for more fraternizing between colonists and subjected populations than officials would have liked. Readers might deduce that this gap echoes the disjunction between the conceptualized colonial enterprise and the
commitment to action. Only at the end of the Fascist colonial reign—when colonial control (as well as metropolitan control) was completely centralized by the dictatorship in Rome—were the more stringent official urban policies, such as apartheid, implemented or attempted in the colonies.

Fuller observes that even though these events fall within the living memory of many Italians, a sense of amnesia precedes their discussion. One might reasonably fear that this presentation of Italian colonialism as less exploitative than that of other countries may bolster this lack of ownership by Italians of their shadowed past. That dark history is often pinned to the scapegoat, Mussolini, although many Italian colonial atrocities predate his rule by decades. This concern, however, is eclipsed many times over by the immense value of this book as a comprehensive catalogue of Italian colonial construction, augmented by the author’s nuanced analysis of Italian politics, society, thought, and perception in the first half of the twentieth century.

ANNE PARMLY TOXEY
Toxey / McMillan Design Associates

Note
1. For the first idea, see Guido Zacconi, La Città Contesa: Dagli Ingegneri Sanitari agli urbanisti 1885–1942 (Milan: Jaca, 1999), 33ff, 182.

Maria Giuffrè
Photographs by Melo Minnella
The Baroque Architecture of Sicily

Maria Sofia Di Fede and Fulvia Scaduto, eds.
La Biblioteca dell’Architetto: Libri e incisioni (XVI–XVIII secolo) custoditi nella Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana

In his 1968 book Sicilian Baroque, Anthony Blunt wrote that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architects from Sicily were experts in technical matters and prolific writers of treatises, publishing more than their mainland Italian contemporaries. He continued with an interesting qualification: “but, they were also Sicilian, and they used their intellect to produce buildings in which the energy and imagination of the south attained full and mature expression” (9). Blunt’s assessment of an exuberant baroque style that reached maturity and flourished in the late seventeenth and the whole of the eighteenth century in Sicily remains intact in two recent books on the architecture of the island. In these publications, a lavishly illustrated architectural survey and a catalog of a recent exhibition on print culture, Blunt’s understanding of an essential southern quality in Sicilian architecture, however, has given way to a more sophisticated and contextual analysis that looks beyond style to the cosmopolitan reality of early modern Sicilian society and culture.

Maria Giuffrè’s The Baroque Architecture of Sicily first appeared in Italian in 2006 and offers a synthesis of recent scholarship. Perhaps recognizing that doubts might be cast on a book measuring 32 by 27 centimeters and including 272 color illustrations, Giuffrè opens with a scholarly justification for the English-language edition. She argues that much of Sicily’s baroque architecture remains relatively unknown to nonresident scholars and that its complexity makes it difficult to comprehend. The variety of Sicily’s architecture comes through beautifully in the architectural photography of Melo Minnella, whose work also graces the pages of Salvatore Boscaino’s earlier writings on the subject (Sicilia barocca: Architettura e città 1610–1760 [Rome: Officina, 2nd ed., 1986; and 3rd rev. ed., 1997]). Giuffrè’s book is composed of four thematic chapters without footnotes. Each is followed by a sumptuous sequence of Minnella’s color photographs that complement the text but also stands alone as a visual essay. The book ends with a postscript and minimal bibliography, raising a question of the book’s intended audience in light of Giuffrè’s stated goal of sparking scholarly interest in her subject.

For Giuffrè, Sicily is “an island without frontiers, open to all the artistic currents flowing into it from across the seas, and yet stubbornly protective of its own genius loci” (8). Whether the topic is politics, architectural practice, or contemporary architectural theory, Giuffrè returns to the leitmotif of Sicily’s insular nature, which she contrasts with the cosmopolitan ambitions of the island’s foreign rulers as well as both native and foreign patrons and architects. The first chapter is a consideration of Sicilian places and provides a social and political context for the architecture. Following political divisions of the era, Giuffrè divides the island between west and east and considers the influence of the dual capitals of Palermo and Messina (until the latter’s fall from grace after 1674) on their hinterlands. The chapter also considers the devastation caused by the 1693 earthquake that destroyed twenty cities and led to substantial rebuilding in the Val di Noto in the southeastern portion of the island. By the early years of the eighteenth century, the southeastern cities—Syracuse, Catania, and Noto—emerged as new capitals of the baroque to paraphrase Giuffrè.

The author’s contextual grounding for the study of architecture reflects recent research on those Italian territories that fell under the domain of the Spanish Habsburg and later Bourbon empires. Giuffrè’s inclusion of multiple illustrations from atlases (still housed in Madrid archives) of Sicily’s coastline and ports confirms her acknowledgment that, despite distance, “Madrid was still very much in control” of the “new urban geography” that arose on the island (24). The nod to Spanish influence is largely political and not, interestingly, architectural. Yet, aside from the impact of Spanish treatises acknowledged by Giuffrè, there are significant parallels that can be traced in the evolution of the baroque in both places. For instance, Giuffrè’s notion of a “long Renaissance,” which she argues characterized much of Sicilian architecture through the late seventeenth century, also fits developments in Spain. Moreover, the delayed arrival of what can be called a late baroque style in Sicily was also seen in Spain. Thanks to the rich photography in this book, one can readily see correspondences in composition and form between monuments in cities as far away...